

# Possession as cultural application of metaphysical cosmology: a genus-typology

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## Introduction

According to I.M. Lewis the cornerstones of religion are 1) belief, 2) ritual, and 3) spiritual experience, which together construct institutions within a society with typological effects that cut across diverse cultural forms, and thus according to him, can be meaningfully compared. The variety of cultural distinctive forms of spiritual experience, be it religious ecstasy, witchcraft, sorcery or possession, is in this interpretation of little sociological significance. What is of sociological significance are the distinctions between central and marginal (or peripheral) cults and how their sociological difference create different effects in a similar religious experience, in this case: spirit possession. Spiritual experiences as spirit possession are grounded in and related to a social environment in which they occur, they bear the 'stamp of the culture and society' in which they arise. In this political interpretation of a specific spiritual experience, Lewis constructs an *epidemiology of possession* with shared socio-political factors whereby the experience reflects the different social conditions in which it occurs ('the social context of possession'). (Lewis, 1993: 1-10, 23) The physical presence of spirits, which are believed in by a specific society, is therefore not just simply stated as inhabiting a metaphysical cosmology, but directly participate and inhabit in their culture and bodies (i.e. possession or ecstasy) as well. By correlating the possession experience with its socio-cultural context within different religions, a genus-typology of possession can possibly be constructed by comparing how the genus 'possession' exists and functions within them. (Freidenreich, 2004: 88-91)

## Constructing a genus of possession

Possession, according to Lewis, reflects socio-political issues (especially 'stress'), and therefore possession has a social and psychological meaning. It functions within a specific context, and its presence is not a given. The sort of presence within a culture can be placed on a spectrum of functioning as a peripheral or central phenomenon:

**Peripheral possession:** Persons or groups with a subject status (in 'social stress' or 'peripheral position'), especially women, who live in a society which accept the existence of metaphysical beings in their cosmology, are more likely to be possessed. This peripheral possession, apart from how the possessed person experience it as an authentic event, can exert influence on his superiors of the possessed person as a form of 'aggressive strategy' or 'conflict management' which provides liberties and attention the possessed person normally lack. But this strategy does not rebel against the subjugating hierarchy. The metaphysical beings possessing subjugated persons are generally not bound by human morality (non-moral or evil), and the possession is viewed as an unwelcome or unwilling event, whereby the possessed is deemed not responsible for his/her actions, and needs to be 'cured'. Peripheral possession therefore represents a metacommunication of class dynamics. (Lewis, 1993: 23-29, 59, 78-79, 94, 108-115, 158. Ong, 1988: 28, 31-35. Gellner, 1994: 29, 37, 43. Boddy, 1994: 413, 416)

**Central possession:** The possession or ecstasy is part of a dominant religion or cult and is a willed and even induced (through ritual) event. The possession happens to an elite person (i.e. prophet), class (i.e. priests or shamans), or specialists (i.e. mediums or healers). It provides vital information or power for a specific society, and addresses its worldly problems (disease, famine, conflict), as well as

providing spiritual and moral messages. Some religions only see their founder(s)' possession as good (i.e. prophethood), and possessions of their followers as bad (which need to be cured). Others only allow a certain class (i.e. elite or trained) to perform the rituals that induce the trance or possession, restricting access to desired metaphysical beings. (Lewis, 1993: 29-30, 118. Gellner, 1994: 27-28, 30)



**Figure 1. A spectrum of possession**

But a spectrum does not provide a sufficient typology. A horizontal spectrum is a reductive model which forces specific contextual phenomena of possession into a masternarrative. (Gellner, 1994: 28-29. Boddy, 1994: 414) Our typology therefore requires rather a scale to take into account the different ways possession has been documented around the world. Peripheral possessions can for example form cults which compete with central possessions within the same religious context. (Gellner, 1994: 42-43) To provide criteria and content for the scale, we need a summary of examples of the genus possession, through which we can construct a typology.

In the research by Ong (1988) is a typical example of individual peripheral possession whereby changes in social context, but not in metaphysical cosmology, created a new scope of possession victims. In Malaysia, women were seen as frail and impure, and in need of control and restriction by men and village in total. Possession occurred to married women in social stress. With the introduction of factories and schools which young women worked in and attended, which were also build on jungle ground (impure and non-human space), young women now were faced with a similar scope of social stress as married women in the villages. Possession now occurred among the young unmarried women. These spirits were generally bad or possibly harmful, and therefore feared. (Ong, 1988: 28-35) Possession here is seen as an illness, occurring to individuals which were already deemed ontologically inferior by their own society, whereby metaphysical beings can attack this inferior person in moments of stress or as punishment. The possession can create an escape for the individual out of the stressful situation (e.g. being removed from the factory), but this is seemingly not the strategy being pursued. It remains just responsive to the stressful context, without really resisting it, as the responses by the superiors to the possessions are uncertain.

The research by McIntosh (2004) shows how a change in social status for a society created a change in metaphysical cosmology. As the Muslim Swahili gained a dominant position in Kenya, a shift occurred in the Giriama people who were deemed inferior and primitive by the Swahili. The changes in cosmology had to do with how the Giriama viewed their own ontology, and with the introduction of Muslim spirits. Due to the cultural, religious, and economical hegemony of the

Swahili, their prejudices on the Giriama were taken over by the Giriama. Changing the ontology of objects and practices normally viewed positively by the Giriama, into ontologies of impurity. (McIntosh, 2004: 96-97) This hegemony is also reflected in who can possess the Giriama, and what the possession demands of the possessed. Giriama can be possessed by 'native' metaphysical beings already recognized by their religion, and which are viewed as moral and generally good beings. But with Swahili dominance, 'foreign' spirits deemed as being Muslim, can attack an individual and force him to follow Muslim norms. Sometimes these possessions end up in conversions to Islam, thereby alleviating the possessed of any responsibility for this cultural and religious treason. But generally this possession is resisted, and reflects the cultural resistance of the Giriama in total against Swahili hegemony. (McIntosh, 2004: 93-94, 98-103, 105-108) A specific possession (whereby possession in general belongs to the central religion of the individual) here is seen as an illness, occurring to individuals which are deemed ontologically inferior by another society, whereby metaphysical beings can attack this inferior person, who lives in a society under stress.

In the research by Gellner (1994) a different situation is shown whereby people from different gender (male and female) and religion (Hindu, Buddhist), and/or lower classes and castes, use possession as a way to compete, but not resist, higher classes. The possession is induced through rituals frequently performed, and is used to serve communal needs. Thereby the possession is a communal tool, whereby the possessed serve as respected healers and mediums. The higher classes are taken up by male priests (Buddhist and Hindu) from high castes (Hindu), and access metaphysical beings through special rituals which are not performed on a frequent basis. This rise of lay and lower class mediums and healers (even into cults) coincides with the introduction of democratic thought, which therefore democratizes access to religious sources (i.e. metaphysical beings), without eliminating the existing hierarchy. (Gellner, 1994: 27-43) In this way, possession is seen as a desired event providing communal service, and functions as a way for the lower classes to become 'middle classes'. This shift in rising status of the lower classes does not change the existing cosmologies, but does challenge it.

## **A suggested genus-typology of possession**

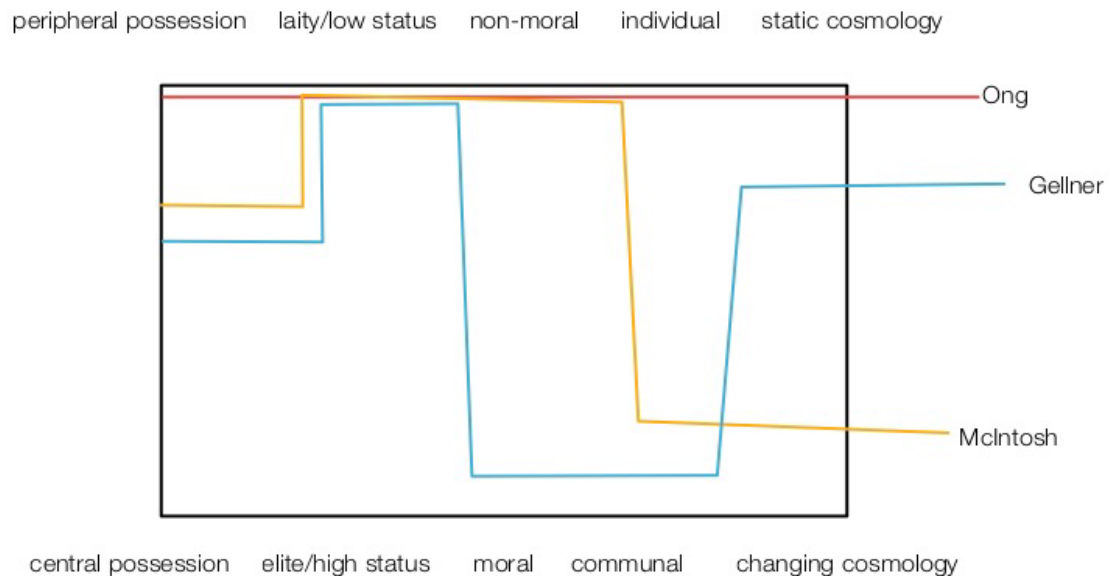
From our examples we get three types of peripheral possessions:

- 1) Possession is seen as an illness, occurring to individuals which were already deemed ontologically inferior by their own society, whereby non-moral metaphysical beings from a static cosmology can attack this inferior person in moments of stress or as punishment.
- 2) A specific possession is seen as an illness, occurring to individuals which are deemed ontologically inferior by another society, whereby non-moral metaphysical beings in a changing cosmology can attack this inferior person, who lives in a society under stress.
- 3) Possession by moral metaphysical beings is seen as a desired event providing communal service, and functions as a way for the lower classes to become 'middle classes'. This shift in rising status of the lower classes does not change the existing cosmologies, but does challenge it.

In these examples we notice several important elements for our typology:

1. The possession can be desired (moral) or undesired (non-moral/evil)
2. The cosmology can be static or changeable
3. The possession reflects or serves individual or communal issues

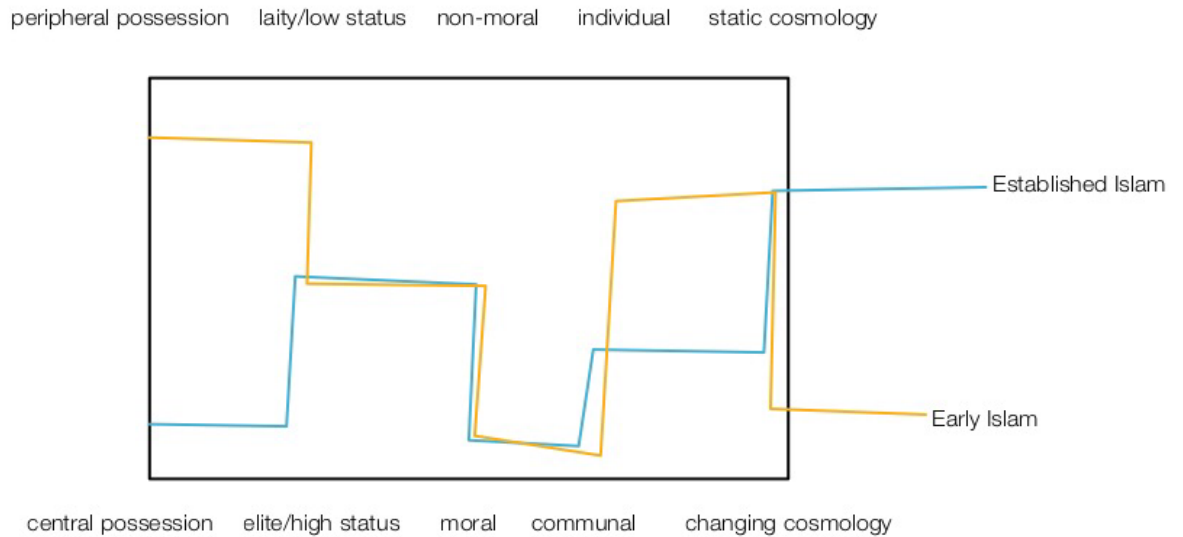
We can now try to construct a scale which indicates a genus-typology of possession:



**Figure 2. A genus-typology of possession**

As can be seen, this multilayered scale portrays the different ways possessions exist and function within present and previous societies around the world. It is still a reductionary model with mirroring essentialistic elements, but one that shows enough differences and similarities of the different 'ingredients' of the possession event can incorporate. In this way, the uniqueness of each possession-movement is retained, but translated into a model from which typological characteristics can be compared. And with the increase of studies on possession-movements, more elements can be added to the scale to extend the universal application and scientific viability. Although the current examples only provide a singular temporal image of the possession events, one can use different indicating lines of the same possession-movement within the scale to show the development of that movement. A religion such as Islam for example, is in its beginning years of prophetic mission peripheral, mixed status, highly moral, generally individual, and with a changing cosmology. After Muḥammad gained more dominance, it slowly becomes central, mixed status, highly moral, communal, and with a more static cosmology. This shows that one of the key factors for an ecstatic movement to become central, is by providing a new cosmology which slowly becomes accepted and adopted as the new static worldview. For this cosmology to become dominant, it means the ecstatic movement must become more communal. And as we also see with Gellner in figure 2, to be communal means it also has to be moral. The importance for a scaled typology to be useful is to incorporate elements which show the differences and similarities in such a way, that one firstly can always directly place other examples into the model (the chosen elements are logical and general enough to include multiple studied

objects), and secondly that the scaled examples now become meaningful to further construct the typology. In this way we can get quick and diverse overviews in compared traditions which provides a refocus to generate new hypothesis. (Freidenreich, 2004: 91-94)



**Figure 3. A genus-typology of possession: development of Islam**

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